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THE SUFI TEACHING STORY
AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO COMPOSITION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Linda Kathryn Burgess

March 1999

THE SUFI TEACHING STORY
AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO COMPOSITION

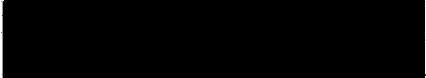
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Approved by:


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March 10, 1999
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Sufi teaching stories with an eye to their possible contribution to composition theory and practice. The Sufi stories, developed in the "medieval" Middle East, are the texts of a problem-posing pedagogy very similar to the pedagogy of knowing developed in the West in the 1960s by Paulo Freire. Like critical literacy teachers, Sufis problematize the nature of signification, question the existence of a coherent experiencing subject, and examine the effects of cultural conditioning. However, like other composition teachers who are unwilling to give up the idea of authentic voice, Sufis also value the wisdom and creativity of the individual. They do not recognize the binary thinking that divides composition into critical and expressivist schools.

Some contemporary theorists insist on the necessity of abandoning claims of foundational truth. Sufis, however, believe that an invisible order underlies diverse manifested forms. I argue that their Neoplatonic worldview, congruent with a postmodern paradigm shift, might bridge the divisions in composition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thesis committee demonstrated astonishing patience while I was reading Jelaluddin Rumi, James Berlin, and Paulo Freire against each other. Dizzy with excitement, I raved about intersections I could not yet articulate. My readers supported my curiosity but restrained themselves from interfering with my process.

In addition to patience, Salaam Yousif has provided useful background material on Islamic culture from his own experience as well as from his library. Carol Haviland has contributed her clear understanding of postmodern theory and its application in the classroom, substituting "and" for "or" at every opportunity. Rise Axelrod, my first reader, has been magnificently generous with her time and criticism, tossing ideas around with me, cautioning me against reductive categorization, and reading with an eye informed by years of experience in creating and refining pedagogies.

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CHAPTER ONE: What Befell the Three

Sufi teaching stories, a medium of instruction in the Middle East for more than a millenium, began to gain a popular following in the West in 1964, when the Naqshbandi Sufi leader Idries Shah of Afghanistan published the first of his many English-language books about the stories (*Sufis*). At that time, the idea of waking people up from automatically believing what they read, hear or see was unfamiliar and surprising to most Westerners. The idea that a text comes into existence with different meaning for each reader had not yet gained wide acceptance in Western literary criticism as it would with the popularization of Reader Response criticism in the seventies. We were also largely unprepared to expect a narrative to serve an instructional purpose. In 1967, Shah wrote that the true function of the Sufi stories is so foreign "to the modern world that no technical or popular term exists to describe them" (*Caravan* 223). In 1978 he added,

We have had to re-open the question of the possible value of tales, stories, jokes and narrative, and hold this door open in the face of a long-standing Western convention that such material is only of entertainment value. What has happened is that the equivalent of a technological infra-structure, or a basic literacy in this field, is being established in the West. (*Learning* 101)

There is no doubt that Shah faced a Western world unprepared to understand him. His timing, however, was perfect, as the dawning of the postmodern period in Western thought created an opening for the appearance of Sufi teaching. Composition theorist Lester Faigley characterizes Western aesthetics, politics, science and pop culture of this period as growing in an "awareness of randomness, ambiguity and chaos" (3). Both Faigley and James Berlin (*Rhetorics*) describe the influence of deconstructive postmodern philosophers and the economic and cultural conditions of the population in the seventies and eighties on the teaching of composition. Theorists in the physical sciences, the social sciences, and composition were talking about a "paradigm shift," a new worldview that foregrounds process and relationship rather than analysis of separate parts.

At the same time, although Faigley and Berlin don't mention it, record numbers of people were turning to the security of organized religion or to the alternative consciousness offered by metaphysics, parapsychology, or hallucinogenic drugs. We experienced the Age of Aquarius and the Harmonic Convergence. Sufi mystics, long-time

believers in the ancient Greek concept of *kairos*, arrived from the East at just this auspicious moment, bringing ancient techniques for tearing down positivist illusions and for facilitating spiritual revelation. "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear," they said, smiling.

During this same time period that Sufis were introducing their new "literacy" to popular audiences in the West, composition theorists were working on a parallel track to create a pedagogy for "critical literacy," a new set of criteria for reading and writing, influenced by postmodern philosophers who question positivist views of language and reality. Although teachers of composition have remained largely unaware of the material from the Middle East, the work that we have been doing in our classrooms in recent years closely resembles the Sufi teachings.

We can see an example of the parallels by looking at the classic Middle Eastern story of "What Befell the Three," which tells the adventures of three dervishes (ascetic holy men) who were searching for the Deep Truth in ways that resemble our own search for ways to teach composition. "The first, Yak-Baba, sat down and contemplated until his head was sore" the story says. "The

second, Do-Agha, stood on his head until his feet were sore. The third, Se-Kalendar, read books until his nose bled." Each of the dervishes found that his efforts were not successful, so the three got together to perform their rituals in unison in search of a Way (Shah, *Tales* 103). This allegory sounds a bit like the story of composition theory starting about thirty years ago when we abandoned our "storehouse" and "garret" images of how writing should be taught. We stopped expecting our students to write solely as a result of having read or having concentrated, or having been visited by the muse, and began to look at reading and writing as social processes.

In the Sufi story, the three teachers saw a weird apparition in the shape of a head. While they were arguing about which mythological creature it might be, it roared at them, "Have you never heard the saying that there are 'as many Ways as there are hearts of men'?" The strange head (possibly, in our terms, a cognitive theorist) sent each of the dervishes off in a different direction.

Curiously, the countries where they were sent seem to bear some resemblance to some of the locations on the map of contemporary composition sketched out by James Berlin in his *College English* article, "Contemporary Composition: The

Major Pedagogical Theories" (233-247). Yak-Baba went to the "Country of Fools," where he found people cowering in fear of a watermelon. In an act somewhat akin to the work Berlin identifies as Current-Traditional composition, Yak-Baba drew out his knife and cut the melon open. He showed the people how the melon was constructed and how it could be used. He even ate a piece of it. But the people were so certain that watermelons were dangerous that they refused to follow his example. "We don't want to know anything about it," they said.

This piece of the allegory could be seen as a description of the kind of teaching of writing that takes text apart and exposes its structure, applying to student writing the set of surgical skills we have developed in analyzing literature. The story could even be said to depict a teacher attempting to model the identity of a writer.

The second dervish, Do-Agha, was sent on a quest to "find the Magic Mirror." When he found it, it was very small and incomplete, being the reflection of the limited thoughts of mankind. But, gazing into it, upside down, he found Deep Knowledge, and he spent many happy years teaching. His students, however, could not maintain the

concentration necessary to learn anything by looking into mirrors. They saw only the images of their own faces.

Do-Agha's experience seems to be analogous to the part of composition country Berlin calls Platonic, where students are engaged in an "internal apprehension" and searching for their "authentic voices" (239). The image of the mirror itself might be a reference to Plato's image in *Phaedrus* (255D). This Platonic mirror turns up often in Sufi stories (Shah, *Learning* 289, Schimmel, *Wind* 74-75, 101-102, 145).

The dervish who liked to read, Se-Kalendar, was instructed to seek the aid of the Jinn of the Whirlpool, a difficult task akin to the work of Berlin's New Rhetoricians. He traveled far, observing many different cultures, asking questions. Every time he got close to the Jinn, it turned out that he had just missed it because it was called by another name in that locality. He seemed to be trapped in what we might call a postmodern impasse, foregrounding differences, unable to reach any solid ground. Eventually he met the Jinn and learned a pattern of activities that led him to great understanding. But his students, copying his motions without realizing the journey that led to them, did not achieve wisdom.

Each of these teachers was the founder of a school, inspiring students to slay watermelons, gaze into mirrors, or perform strange rituals for centuries after the original meaning of the actions had been forgotten.

This tale is attributed to Murad Shami, who died in 1719. Shah says that the story conceals a deeper meaning than the obvious (*Tales* 103), but he, being a typical Sufi teacher, does not tell what it is. Neither Shah nor Shami, of course, could have imagined the interpretation I have stretched this story to provide. They had never heard of multiple intelligences, modes or genres of discourse, expressivism or social-constructionism. Shami was describing some of the Ways of teaching that developed during the classical Sufi period in the Middle East, from 700 to 1500 AD (Shah, *Sufis* 27) and their later crystallization into traditions. He was pointing, I believe, to individual differences that mask an underlying similarity among students and teachers everywhere: the way that they are blinded by their preconceived ideas and the way they copy the outer forms rather than the central tenets of a teaching. For me, the moral of this story is that rigid attention to theoretical consistency interferes with teaching and learning.

In Shami's time, the story was pertinent because teaching in the Middle East was experiencing a period of stagnation(Shah, *Learning* 101). However, during the classical period of Sufi thought, from the eighth century to the fourteenth, this part of the world had been a turbulent center for epistemological debate. Inquiry into ways of knowing and teaching had flourished. Steady migration throughout the Islamic realm as well as the pressures brought by the European Christian Crusaders and the savage Mongol armies of Genghis Khan kept diverse cultures in contact and in turmoil (Harvey 19). New ways of thinking challenged an authoritative teaching model based on the legalistic, formal traditions of Islam. Iconoclastic and counter-hegemonic Sufi teachers created the stories to keep students awake and thinking about the conditioning that defined their ways of processing data.

Most composition teachers today have traveled an imaginary landscape similar to that of the story, trying one way or another, and synthesizing elements of several into our individual teaching programs, as we have attempted to help students from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds see in multiple ways. Our expanding view of what it can mean to teach composition is evident right now

in the CSUSB English Department, where the faculty has agreed to new (1998) Guidelines for English 101. The new catalog description calls for "Emphasis on the processes of writing and critical reading, not only to communicate, but also to generate thinking and to examine assumptions." These new goals, with their "not only to" and "but also to," articulate our commitment to provide a variety of Ways.

Our new choices, examining assumptions and generating thought, suggest that we want to include aspects of two forms of non-positivist composition theory that Berlin describes as New Rhetoric and Platonism. Sufi mystics use elements of both. Like the composition theorists Berlin classifies as New Rhetoricians (242-3), the Sufis use texts as a basis for their teaching but not for the purpose of transmitting information. They see texts as dynamic catalysts to thought. Like contemporary critical literacy theorists, they problematize the nature of signification and question the existence of a stable, coherent subject. But for the New Rhetorician, Berlin says, there is no truth outside of that created in the social exchange (243).

For the Sufi, on the other hand, truth resides beyond the realm of language. Exercises in examining assumptions

remove the obstacles to experiencing reality. These beliefs, along with a concept of "remembrance" of a perfect Being behind all forms, and an emphasis on the use of analogy, position parts of their pedagogy in the Platonic category of Berlin's model (241).

Berlin paints the New Rhetoric and Platonic positions in composition theory as mutually exclusive reactions against the positivist Current-Traditional model, since each emphasizes a different view of truth and of writers. But in fact many composition teachers use a combination of methods reflecting a variety of theoretical backgrounds. Perhaps the contemporary sense of separation between the threads of composition pedagogy might be bridged by an epistemology like the Sufi one. A Sufi believes that the student is both a product of cultural conditioning and an individual with innate abilities. Sufis use the deconstruction of binaries as a transition to respect for the underlying unity of human experience.

Since Shah brought Sufi stories to the West in the sixties, the stories have turned up in academic work in various ways. Stanford psychologist Robert Ornstein incorporated many of them into a revision of his *Psychology of Consciousness*, suggesting that they might help connect

the linear and non-linear functions of the brain (141). The CSUSB History Department is demonstrating its current interest in "medieval" Islam by planning a conference on Rumi for October, 2000. But the stories have made their way into the literary canon of the university only in the realm of comparative literature, where reviewers such as John Chen have drawn comparisons between the overt meaning of the stories and Chinese, Taoist and Shakespearean themes. References to the stories in the literature of "English" studies are limited to their use by Nancy Shields Hardin and a few other critics in their analyses of the work of contemporary British novelist Doris Lessing.

I think that the stories have been inaccessible to us as composition theorists because there is such a fundamental difference between scholars and Sufis. As scholars in the West, we have been interested in inductive reasoning, in accumulating information and making generalizations from it, in comparing it with what we already know. Shah tells us that Sufis, on the other hand, are dedicated to "developing a line of communication with ultimate knowledge, not with combining individual facts, however historically exciting, [n]or [with] theorizing in any way at all" (*Sufis*, xi). Ultimate knowledge has not

been included in our paradigm of academic pursuits since before the Enlightenment, and it is still not a popular idea now that many in composition are engaged in the postmodern activity of scoffing at metanarratives.

However, it is in this capacity as a "line of communication," as a mystical teaching, that thousands of these teaching stories are in print in English now and drawing a large popular following. Kabir Helminski, one of the twentieth century translators of the great Sufi storyteller Jelaluddin Rumi, estimates from the sales of his books that Rumi may have been the best-selling poet in America for the last ten or fifteen years (Alborz 3).

By eschewing theory and by embracing a variety of visions of the individual, the Sufi pedagogy allows alternative worldviews to coexist. It is flexible enough to be useful in a wide variety of situations. Although its vision of an "ultimate knowledge" will offend those who demand the abandonment of metanarratives, its appeal seems to be wide. The Sufi view that education should develop the latent ability of the individual to perceive and to process information (Einhorn 4) is entirely consistent with the emphasis on psychological strategies and experiential

education that characterizes much of contemporary composition practice.

Therefore, I believe it may be rewarding to look at the Sufi teaching story in terms of how it might be used in teaching ways of reading and writing. Although we do not know what kind of writing assignments Sufis give (if any) or how they assess student progress, the Sufi preparatory work for beginning students, the work that is done with these stories, is fascinatingly similar to many of the projects of the contemporary first-year composition classroom.

CHAPTER TWO: The Dervish and the Grammarian

The Sufi teaching story is a hard item to define. At first glance, it appears to be a very short story resembling a joke. But Sufi stories may well occupy a genre niche of their own, differentiated from similar stories by their function. A few Sufi stories take the form of adventure sagas, like the one in my introduction, but most are very brief narratives, often less than fifty words, lacking in any descriptive detail, that provide a snappy bit of conversational repartee. Consider this typical example, attributed to the great thirteenth century storyteller Jelaluddin Rumi:

A grammar teacher fell in the well and was screaming for help. A dervish came along. He said, "I'll get you out. I seen a ladder up at the mosque."

The grammarian said, "Young man, your verb tense is incorrect."

The dervish said, "If that's what you think is important in this situation, you'd better stay in the well until I learn to speak correctly," and he went on down the road. (retold from Shah, *Tales* 193)

As this story illustrates, a Sufi story may present a dialog between two people, one with a traditional point of view and one who questions it, or it may depict a person or a group of people whose thought processes are ordinary but

mistaken. Often metaphor, symbolism, or analogy is involved. The dialog is highly indirect, like many jokes that require the hearers to fill in missing premises before they laugh. However, the stories are not intended as jokes.

The stories of this genre seem to be something like the tales and fables of many folk traditions, but their purpose is different. As literary critic Nancy Shields Hardin points out, most folk tales provide entertainment and a moral of some sort (314). The Sufi story is not intended for either purpose. Often it strikes the hearers as funny, but its main purpose is to change their thinking processes – and to do it by another means than supplying a model for the expected outcome. The Sufi story is always a means, not an end, a teaching tool intended to upset rather than inform. Shah says that the Sufi story works to expose assumptions that are an unconscious part of the student's ways of thinking (*Learning* 38). The story remains open-ended, depending on the response of a hearer or reader for interpretation (Hardin 314). Beyond that, the experience of interpreting a Sufi story is said to help the student to develop new connections within the brain, enabling more intuitive perceptions (Einhorn 2-3).

Our story about the teacher in the well is an exemplar I have chosen for its relevance to our work in composition. The obvious meaning to a composition teacher at CSUSB this year will likely be that correct form is not always the highest priority. But the story may also illustrate the principle that it is the people in positions of power who make the rules, or that people who are at the bottom may have difficulty analyzing the conditions of their oppression. My students have added that the story has these meanings:

- "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."
- "In a life or death situation, be glad if there's somebody around who speaks your language at all."
- "Be careful how you criticize."
- "There's a time and a place for everything."
- "The tree that can bend will survive."

A Sufi teacher would applaud all of these interpretations as correct (although preliminary). Sufi stories do not necessarily have a hidden meaning or a "real" meaning; they are designed solely to be decoded to show that they have multiple meanings (Shah, *Way* 27-28). It is the assumption that the story has a different meaning for each individual

that makes a Sufi teaching story something more than a joke or a fable. It is an assumption that might also make such a story a pleasant and nonthreatening introduction to literary analysis in the composition classroom. In the process of discovering many meanings in a simple story, students may develop confidence that their individual views are valid.

A Sufi interpretation of the story involves taking it a step beyond generalities, taking it to a personal level (Einhorn 3). I have experienced Sufi group lessons where the teacher presented a story and then divided the class into small groups of two or three to work with a prompt that related the story to personal experience. For this story, there might be a sequence of prompts: "Have you ever refused to accept help because you objected to the way someone spoke?" and "Can you think of a situation where you refused to help someone who seemed to be judging you?" In a Sufi gathering, each student would have perhaps five minutes to talk through a think-aloud protocol, with the other group members listening as silent witnesses. In a composition classroom we could accomplish much the same exploration of memory in a slightly less invasive way by assigning these prompts as freewrites, to be shared or not

as the writer chooses. I believe that the Sufi speaking session, where the student speaks without stopping for set period of time in response to a closely-defined prompt is very closely related to the freewriting exercises we propose in our classrooms.

A Sufi teacher would close this lesson by bringing the class back together to share their insights, possibly directing the conversation toward a comparison of the two experiences. Is the dervish on moral high ground here, or has pride become a problem for both parties? A composition teacher might raise the same questions, possibly in preparation for effective collaboration in peer review. Or we might take the question in a more global direction, asking the class to consider whether Standard English is appropriate in all communication situations.

Although the ultimate purpose of Sufi teaching is to bring students to a sense of their spiritual unity, the texts Sufis use with beginning students, these teaching stories, have no obvious reference to religion or to spirituality. They are intended to change the way the student processes everyday perceptions, opening a door to interrogation of assumptions and motives. Thus they are

designed to address one of the objectives of many of the composition courses taught today.

CHAPTER THREE: Following the Scent of Roses

Stories used by Sufi teachers today are often ancient stories adapted to the contemporary scene, retrofitted with billboards, hospitals, streetlights, keys, and restaurants, in keeping with the Sufi theoretical position that a story has no integrity as an object but should change to fit the local situation. This position also explains why most of the stories are not attributed to any particular author or time. Consequently it is difficult to work from the stories themselves to build the framework that Western scholarly tradition conditions us to expect in dealing with a literary genre or a pedagogical theory: tracing its development and florescence.

But from the beginning of the period in which Sufis have been identified as a group, close to the time of the Prophet Muhammad (A.D.570?-632) (Shah, *Sufis* 27), they have had a reputation for expressing themselves with shrewd, pithy questions that upset more traditional thinkers. They have distinguished themselves by abandoning both the values of the world and the formalism of Islamic law, by claiming a relationship with God based on love and direct revelation, and by using shocking figures of speech to get their point across.

The culture in which Sufis developed this pedagogy was focused on religious belief to a degree that we can scarcely imagine. When, for example, a Sufi says "Hamdulilla," we might translate the words literally as "Praise the Lord," and be referring to some distant deity that we would never mention in the classroom. But the Sufi means "Praise God in *all* his manifestations—and *everything* is a manifestation of God." The challenge for a Sufi is to figure out how God is represented in everything that transpires. Consequently, any human action becomes a metaphor for God's action. The Sufi, looking at a chaotic world and trying to see God's hand, is a master generator of metaphors (Barks in Rumi, *Delicious* x). And when a Sufi deconstructs a binary like sacred and profane or good and evil, the resulting answer is that it is all God. It is nearly impossible for Westerners to grasp the mental habits that produce this worldview.

But it is possible to get some sense of the development of the Sufi teaching materials by looking at a few of the practitioners. I've chosen to touch down in four places in classical Sufi history: with Rabia al Adawiyya (717?-801?), Muhammad Al-Ghazzali (1058-1111), Jelaluddin Rumi (1207-73), and Mulla Nasrudin (possibly c.1237-84).

Rabia

Rabia, born early in the eighth century in Basra, is often cited as a pivotal person in the development of Sufi thought. Legend has accorded her full stature with men in knowledge and saintliness, but, unlike men, she is not referred to by her surname. Throughout the literature she is called simply "Rabia" (Smith 2). She lived a life of extreme poverty, orphaned and sold into slavery as a child, in a culture where property, education, and literacy were reserved for upper-class males. When her master freed her, she refused offers of marriage, continuing to live a meager existence voluntarily, taking a vow to ask no one for anything but to accept only what God gave her. Her extreme devotion to God allowed her to ignore her suffering completely (Smith 29-52, El Sakkakini 17-30).

While Rabia did not write or tell full-blown multi-character narratives herself, her incisive correctives made her a character in later teaching stories. Stories are told about the intellectuals of Basra coming to learn from her and about her responses to them. It is told that she heard the venerated teacher Salih al-Marri preaching on the theme carried over from Christianity to Islam: "Knock and the door will be opened to you."

Rabia asked him, "When has that door ever been closed?" (El Sakkakini 66, Shah, *Learning* 75), demonstrating the sense of access to God that is characteristic of Sufi teaching. But Rabia didn't say, "My point of view is a little more holy." She asked her student a question that caused him to think about what he was saying.

Today's collectors of Sufi stories ascribe to Rabia a cleverness that foreshadows the full development of the Sufi story genre. British novelist Doris Lessing, for example, says that accounts of Rabia's teaching reveal "a dry wit, an originality, something salty and simple" (El Sakkakini 5). Lessing recounts as evidence the onion incident: A woman was cooking stew outside Rabia's house and needed an onion. A bird flew over and dropped one into the pot. As Lessing retells the story, "The other woman said it was a miracle from God. Rabia said, 'My Lord is not an onion merchant'" (6). Lessing's account of the story is close to that given by her Sufi teacher, Idries Shah, except that Shah puts Rabia's response in the form of a question: "'A miracle, you say? What, does my Lord therefore keep an onion shop?'" (*Learning* 55).

It's a good story, but it is probably not historically accurate. The careful research of scholar Margaret Smith into accounts written soon after Rabia's death turns up a less interesting version: "Rabia was boiling some food in a cooking pot and needed an onion, but had none, and there appeared a bird with a wild onion in its beak and threw it down to her" (Abd Allah b. Isa, qtd. by Smith 56). That was the end of the story at the time. According to Smith, the Persian poet Farid al-Din Attar (c1120-c1230) added to the story the plot development that Rabia refused to eat the onion, saying "'I am not safe from a trick' (i.e. perhaps Satan had sent the onion)" (55). This version of the story adds a dualism, a binary between God and Satan, that is uncommon in Sufi thought. Rabia's clever retort distinguishing Allah from an onion dealer seems to be a still later addition to the story and one that departs still farther from the usually pantheistic bent of Sufi stories.

I reveal the variations among these accounts to qualify any impression I may be giving that I can draw a straight timeline of Sufi thought. There is great difficulty in working with texts that are so extremely old and that have been retranslated and retransmitted by people

with a variety of political agendas. Additional difficulty arises for the English-language reader because Arabic and Persian words resonate depths of meaning in a way that English can never convey. We cannot know for sure what Rabia said or what it meant to her hearers.

Despite these difficulties, authorities East and West agree that Rabia was one of the originators of a new way of thinking that turned popular perceptions around, stressing the personal spiritual life rather than the formal requirements of Islamic orthodoxy, and distinguishing divine love from human emotionality (Smith 232, El Sakkakini 70). In a world where Islamic authorities proclaimed the glory of God with lengthy retellings of the traditions of the transmission of revelation, in proper historic sequence, with magnificent artwork and calligraphy, a humble, illiterate woman who owned nothing and who preferred prayer to food became a prototype for a new kind of teacher.

Sufi ideas gained a considerable popular following in the next centuries. Dervish orders began to flourish. These schools were small working communities where disciples gathered around a teacher (Schimmel, *Wind* 24). One of Shah's collections of Sufi stories, *Tales of the Dervishes*,

unusual in that it gives references to authors of stories, traces many stories to this time period.

A great center of world knowledge developed in Baghdad in the eighth century, as the prestige of Greek science was growing there (von Grunebaum 54). Islamic scholars studied Greek philosophy, astronomy and natural science, building a scientific tradition on the work of Ptolemy and Galen. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, Arab poets were elaborating on the Platonic theme of love as a divine madness (von Grunebaum 323). However, the theologians and philosophers of Islam did not read Homer or Greek mythology, because their sensibilities were informed by a belief in a single God. Many Muslims were critical of Plato as well because of the pantheon of gods that cavort in his work. Some were suspicious of all that talk about love. One sect, the Zahirites, basing religious law on literal readings of the Koran, argued that people who feel something they think is love toward God are merely projecting a fantasy, for God is altogether incommensurable with human beings (Al-Ghazzali 58-59).

During this time, Sufi saints upset orthodox Muslims by claiming direct revelation and, in some cases, direct union with God, without the help of transmitted revelation,

authorities, or rationality. The controversial mystic Al-Hallaj was executed for such a blasphemy in 922, for saying, "I am the Truth." His execution did not serve as a deterrent to Sufis, however, but stirred up sympathy and more rebellion (Daniel xxxi).

The earliest extant text that attempts to reconcile Sufi thought and orthodoxy was written about this time by Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi, a lawyer who died in Bokhara about 990 (Schimmel, *Mystical* 85), cataloguing the tenets of Islam as accepted by Sufis and the technical terms used by them. Kalabadhi sought unity above all, attempting to deconstruct the binaries that led to discrimination against Sufis (Kalabadhi 125-6).

But the Islamic community continued to splinter into numerous sects, each with its own concerns. The powerful Shiites, particularly the exclusive Ismaili movement, taught that followers must be guided by authoritative teachers into the esoteric secrets of the religion, while the mainstream Sunnis believed that the Prophet Muhammed had given all the instruction anybody needs (Daniel xxix; Schimmel, *Mystical* 93-95).

Ghazzali

At the close of the eleventh century, the great scholar and pedagogical theorist Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazzali, a professor of Islamic theology of the Nizamia school at Baghdad, looked at this complex situation from the point of view of bolstering the Sunni position. He recognized that the various forms of orthodox Islam held in common a view of their religion as doctrine explicated by an intellectual elite and followed by the passive masses. He recognized, too, that the anti-intellectual popular uprising known as Sufism could serve his purpose of uniting the people against the Shiites if he could reconcile it with the orthodoxy of the Koran (Daniel xxx).

Ghazzali set out to create a pedagogy that would take the immediate experience and the purified lifestyle of the mystic, the pathos and ethos of the Sufi position, and set them in an intellectual framework (Daniel xxxiii). This work represented a major mind-shift for the great scholar, who was known for having memorized more than 300,000 verses of the Koran in a lifetime of supporting its authority. Now he turned heads in Islam by announcing that real education consists not of filling students with information, but of stimulating their consciousness (Shah, *Sufis* 150). His

solution seems to foreshadow the twentieth-century work of Paulo Freire, who decries a "banking" model of education and asks students to become aware of their thinking (Freire 58), in the interest of empowering the common person.

Ghazzali sought to purge Sufism of its Neoplatonic and ecstatic elements (Schimmel, *Mystical* 96). But he used the techniques developed by Sufi teachers, those short stories that point out the fallacies of common ways of thinking, to build his case for the value of examining assumptions. In his *Alchemy of Happiness*, for example, he presents the story of a group of blind men feeling an elephant, to show that the data gained by observation of the world of phenomena are disputable (Al-Ghazzali 20). I'll return to this story in the next chapter to show how it relates to our current practice in asking students to read critically.

Ghazzali's teaching spread to other Sufi schools and brought a Sufi influence to moderate Islam. Sufi curriculum included reading and writing, but it did not necessarily prepare students for positions of power or for employment. Sufis were teaching students to question authority, to think for themselves, and to combine intuition with intellectual work. Some of the Sufi students became local political leaders or scholars, but others took vows of

poverty and wandered in the desert all their lives. Under the influence of teachers such as these, the education offered in Sufi schools in the classical period was not at all the same as the academic education of the time, which trained students in strategies of argument, rational and theological sciences, and religious law (Schimmel, *Wind* 13). The distinction was drawn clearly by Ghazzali, who wrote that "there is a form of knowledge which can be attained by man, which is of such an order that it is to scholastic learning as adulthood is to infancy" (qtd. by Shah, *Way* 26). Sufi literature was designed to bridge that gap between logical thought and direct, intuitive knowledge of God (Shah, *Sufis* ix).

Rumi

A century later, another great Islamic scholar, Jelaluddin Rumi, turned in midlife from orthodox practice to Sufi mysticism. Rumi and his family had fled their homes in Khorassan (now Afghanistan) when Rumi was twelve years old, and had settled in Konya where Rumi became the leader of a famous divinity school (Harvey 19). He was an accomplished scholar, writer and teacher, wealthy and surrounded by devoted disciples. When he was thirty-seven years old, Rumi met a transient dervish teacher, an elderly

street-corner philosopher named Shams, who asked him such piercing questions that Rumi fell off his donkey in shock.

Shams had walked across the deserts from Tabriz, in Persia, burning with his vision of God, searching for a student he would be able to teach. His vision was so advanced that he had not been able to share it with anyone. The predicament of this teacher who knew too much to be able to teach it has captured the imagination of several current writers. Coleman Barks writes that Shams was charismatic enough to draw crowds but sly enough to disappear whenever it happened (6), and Andrew Harvey adds to the story that Shams was so ferocious and so abrasive that no one could stand to remain near him (22). Shams needed an extraordinarily articulate student who could act as an intermediary between his vision and the assumptions held by ordinary people. He needed a student who could be his mouth, and he found that student in Rumi. But he had to prevent Rumi from using words to mask the Truth. He was relentless in stripping away every defense that Rumi could muster. He said of Rumi, "He speaks fine words, but don't be satisfied with them. Behind each is something you should ask him" (qtd. by Barks in Rumi, *Delicious* xii).

Rumi and Shams entered a trance-like communion that went on for many months, exciting the jealousy of Rumi's students and his children. Shams left town, and Rumi grieved, his nostalgia for God fueled by his longing for the company of his friend. Shams was found in Damascus, and he returned to Konya for another round of communion with Rumi.

Eventually Shams disappeared for good, probably murdered by Rumi's youngest son (Harvey 29, Schimmel, *Wind* 18). Rumi mourned deeply. But then he developed a realization that Shams' energy and insights still lived, embodied now in his own teaching. He began the outpouring of love-poetry and teaching stories that have endeared him to millions across the world and over the centuries. Neoplatonic ideas were again in fashion in the Middle East (Schimmel, *Wind* 48), and Rumi's stories about his martyred teacher often echo Plato's stories about Socrates.

Rumi's stories show human beings in every kind of predicament, all of them metaphors for God's actions. Coleman Barks makes this observation: "For Rumi, anything that humans do, any cruelty, any blindness, resonates with wisdom about the inner life. Any love-impulse especially, however distorted, moves as part of a larger Wanting"

(Rumi, *Delicious* x). Rumi lived fully the Islamic belief that God's hand is visible in any human action. The problem of teaching and learning was particularly interesting to him, and many of his stories, like the one that opens this chapter, tell about teachers.

Coleman Barks brings us an electrifying story about teaching, a Rumi story that was omitted from earlier Western translations of the *Mathnawi*, Rumi's huge book of teaching stories. The story tells of the day that Juhi decided that the men's side of the mosque was too crowded, so he went in disguised as a woman. The preacher was explicating the letter of the law: that pubic hair must be clipped to the length of a grain of barley in order for prayer to be correct. Juhi asked the woman next to him to reach under his chadar and check his hair. She touched his penis, and she screamed.

'Look how my sermon has touched her heart!' the preacher marveled.

'I don't think it was her heart that was touched, so much as her hand' Juhi responded. 'But, oh that your words could so touch a heart.' (Rumi, *Delicious* 103)

This tale may be more appropriate for presentation in the pedagogy class than in the composition classroom, because it illustrates so precisely the problem with the

assumption often made by traditional authoritative teachers that lecturing on fine points of law (such as grammatical rules) will educate people. It also raises the question of what kind of assignments will likely "touch a heart" or cause students to produce any meaningful response. Rumi believed, as many composition teachers do today, that the student's personal experience must be engaged to provoke any "touching" expression.

Rumi goes on in this story to compare Islamic teachers with goats, and ends with this advice: "Forget your beard and your self-importance. Be an invisible guide, like the scent of roses that shows where the inner garden is" (104). Rumi is advising teachers not to pride themselves on their power and authority, but to use subtle ways of bringing students to understanding. We will ask today, though, whether Rumi's "inner garden" is a cultural construct, and whether those subtle moves are assimilative.

Rumi thought not. He thought that a belief in the underlying unity of all human beings was a prerequisite for social justice. And he did include everyone in his definition. At Rumi's school and Haji Bektash's fourteenth century one, disciples included men and women from all social classes (Schimmel, *Wind* 24-25), in spite of

criticism from the community, which felt that education should be reserved for rich men. These Sufis made it clear that women should be educated not only for the benefit of the women, but for the good of society (Shah, *Way* 30).

Rumi, known in Turkey as Mevlana (Arabic for "our master"), is probably the best known of all Sufi teachers and writers, as well as one of the most prolific poets in history. Philosophers Denise Breton and Christopher Largent call Rumi the "greatest mystical poet of all time" (8).

Nasrudin

Another large group of stories, produced by unnamed authors, tell of the antics of *Mulla* (in Arabic, or *Hodja*, in Turkish) Nasrudin, a village *imam* or Sunni spiritual leader. Nasrudin goes bumbling around getting into trouble by thinking and acting in ways that are entirely typical of human beings but are inappropriate to the situation. The Sufi student knows, of course, that each story conceals a second interpretation where the Mulla is actually a wise person just pretending to be an idiot (Kayererli 8). Mulla enacts the tradition in which the Sufi teacher mirrors the ineffective thinking of the student. Nasrudin stories are commonly updated and are still being invented today, as

this character has developed a life that transcends any particular historical period or place.

Updated and timeless Nasrudin stories are so common in Sufi circles in the West that it came as a surprise to me to learn, while traveling in Turkey, that there may have been an actual historical Nasrudin who lived in central Anatolia. The government of Turkey, a secular republic usually devoted to modernist ideas of progress, publishes considerable material about this cultural hero, represents a cartoon image of him on a postage stamp and on its web page, and maintains a tomb with his name on it, near Konya, for tourists to visit (Kayeyerli back cover). But Sufis go to the nearby tombs of Rumi and Shams to absorb the rarified vibrations said to emanate from anything these saints have touched, while scoffing at the possibility that Nasrudin's tomb is worth visiting. Nasrudin is seen as a personification of aspects of the mind, not as a person. However, Mujdat Kayeyerli, writing in one of the booklets recently published by the Turkish government, expresses a very high regard for Nasrudin: "Hodja sifts out and points to ridiculous aspects of persons and of incidents. His solutions do not use force, they use knowledge. All

elements to be laughed at and to be meditated on gather in one sentence of reply by Hodja" (8).

Nasrudin often taught that people tend to look for things in the wrong places:

On one occasion, a neighbor found him down on his knees looking for something.

"What have you lost, Mulla?"

"My key," said Nasrudin.

After a few minutes of searching, the other man said, "Where did you drop it?"

"At home."

"Then why, for heaven's sake, are you looking here?"

"There is more light here." (Shah, *Sufis* 62, cf. Ornstein 144-45)

This story might well be used to illustrate the logical fallacy we call "protecting the hypothesis," where investigators reject any research approaches or theories that don't agree with their preconceived plan. A Sufi teacher would allow the key to be symbolic of whatever the student might be seeking. In spiritual teaching, enlightenment is the kind of emergent goal, impossible to conceptualize, that might be symbolized by the lost key. In our field, "good writing" is a similarly difficult object to find. The story will have a different meaning for every interpreter.

To a Sufi way of thinking, chronological accounts of tradition and genre like the one I have just attempted are

pointless. Authorship is irrelevant in talking about stories that are not seen as products but as vehicles. Neither fame nor wealth is attractive to a Sufi, and the writers whose names I have mentioned are regarded as unfortunate victims of the searchlight of fame (Shah, *Way* 286). Shah says, employing typical Sufi analogy, that your Oriental rug belongs on your living room floor, not in Mongolia where its graphics may have originated (*Sufis* 24). In the same way, Sufi teaching has value where it is working, not by virtue of its age or authority.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Whirlpool

The Sufi story that opens this paper, "What Befell the Three," depicts a teacher who has read extensively traveling in search of the Jinn of the Whirlpool. This search takes him into country where nothing is stable, nothing is what it seems, he can't believe anything he hears, and even language doesn't help define any terms. His experience is something like that of composition teachers whose work is informed by deconstructive postmodern philosophy, except that today's teachers rule out the possibility that their whirlpool of relativity is ruled over by a Jinn or any organizing principle.

We could assume, since this teacher is such a reader, that his teaching centers on the critical reading of texts and an examination of the validity of arguments and the assumptions underlying the claims made by writers. This is the work done in critical literacy classrooms today, where students are taught to evaluate arguments.

Many composition teachers today battle with the tendency of students to believe what they read, by examining the way that evidence is used to support claims. Some of us ask students to question the widely-held

positivist assumption that we can look objectively at the world. This assumption depends on another: that we know who we are, and that we are stable and coherent observers. Our assumption that we can describe what we see to another person also depends on a questionable view of language as a transparent medium of communication. All of these kinds of questioning depend on a view of culture and language as socially constructed.

Sufi teachers, too, seek ways to help students realize that the acts of relating something to our own previous experience or combining ideas in a way that we have been taught are patterned by social constructs (Shah, *Sufis xi*).

Logical Fallacy

Many contemporary composition classes are working on critical thinking projects to stimulate active reading processes that question the assumptions of the writer. In this context, it is not uncommon for composition teachers to include a study of logical fallacies in their teaching of reading strategies.

This project is one that Sufis are involved in as well, although with a slightly different emphasis. Sufis are fond of pointing out that even the best logic has its limitations as a guide for behavior. Rumi writes, for

example, that a sick person decides to go a doctor on the basis of logic, but then, placing faith in the doctor, doesn't need logic any more (Shah, *Sufis* 120). However, even though logic is not the only way that a Sufi understands, bad logic is the subject of many teaching stories. I think that logical fallacy is an area in which Sufi stories could be of great use in the composition classroom.

I have found that students are interested in fallacy because they are eager for tools that will help them see in new ways. But working with lists of Latin names or technical terms is difficult. It seems to me that the students remember the names of fallacies best when they have an analogy or a visual image to work with. They remember "slippery slope" and "straw man" with ease, but they don't remember "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" or "equivocation." I have found that teaching students to recognize fallacy depends on giving them memorable examples. But as long as I am still assigning good professional writing for my students to read (as I am still clinging to some vestige of the storehouse model of learning), I am at a loss for examples of bad reasoning.

I suspect that Islamic teachers in the Middle Ages may well have faced the same problem. They too built an educational system on classical Greek and Roman rhetorical foundations, devoting a great deal of attention to legal argument (Schimmel, *Wind* 13). The Sufi teachers departed from that model by teaching fallacy in a new way, by offering silly little stories that illustrate the fallacies.

The fallacy of consistency, for example, is illustrated by stories with the theme that the appropriate answer to a question is different at different times. The Turkish government publication has a quick one, called "One Must Keep His Word."

I've edited it here for spelling and punctuation:

They asked Hodja how old he was. He said he was forty. A few years later they asked him again, and again he said he was forty.

They said, "Come, Hodja, you were forty long ago. Are you still forty?"

Hodja said, "I am a man of my word. I never go back on my word. . . ." (Kayayerli 67)

This story appears in many versions in Sufi literature, probably because a Sufi teacher does not hesitate to change a story to make it meaningful to a particular community of students. Using it in my composition classroom, I might leave it in its original

form as an example of a teaching from a far-distant culture, or I might change the main character to my mother or Jack Benny, and change the age to thirty-nine. In any of these forms it would help me illustrate why consistency is not always desirable.

A Sufi approach would be to present the story first and ask the students to figure out how it relates to other materials in the curriculum. A variation of that approach for composition students who have already learned something about logic and fallacy would be to present the story and ask them to identify the problems with the logic that it presents. I can imagine maintaining a file of Sufi stories, each on an index card perhaps, and inviting students to check them out and solve the problem, possibly for extra-credit points.

Any teacher who wants to try this approach to teaching logic can find hundreds of examples of fallacy stories in the Sufi literature. Many of them deal in different ways with the problem of faulty cause and effect. One story shows Hodja eating rice with his hands. A man asked him, "Why are you eating with your five fingers?"

Hodja answered, "Because I don't have six fingers" (Kayayerli 89). Clearly, Hodja's response doesn't

address the nature of cause in the same way that the questioner intended; it is so misdirected that it might even be a case of equivocation.

Another story I might use in talking about fallacies of causation is called "Balance of the World," and it might be of interest to students studying urban planning or civil engineering.

One of the villagers asked Hodja why people travel in different directions when they leave for work in the morning. Hodja was proud that his reputation for wisdom brought people to ask him questions like this. He said, "Very simple. The world would lose its balance if everybody went the same direction." (reworded from Kayayerli 90)

Here we see a situation where an assumption of causation is based on a set of faulty premises: that the world is unstable and that people make an effort to hold it upright. This story may also illustrate the fallacy of false authority, for it seems that a question about town zoning might call for some other wisdom than that of a holy man accustomed to looking at a larger picture than the local map.

Hodja addresses the fallacy of basing a conclusion on too little evidence (hasty generalization) with this story:

Someone said to Hodja, "People are strange. In the summer they can't stand the heat, but in the winter they hate the cold."

Hodja replied, "Have you heard anyone complain about spring?" (reworded slightly from Kayayerli 91)

We see here Hodja's opinion that the speaker is making a generalization about people, but that their comments about two seasons are not enough to tell the whole story. On the other hand (and there always is another hand when we're dealing with a Sufi story), the speaker may not have been generalizing; she may have been contrasting winter complaints with summer ones. In that case, this story is about the fallacy of suppressed alternatives. By looking only at the binary between two seasons of the year, the speaker created a dichotomy that excluded spring.

Equivocation might be illustrated by the story of "Hodja's Turkey:"

Hodja went to the market and saw a little bird for sale. The owners were asking a lot of money for it. Hodja asked what the bird could do that made it so valuable.

"This parrot can talk," they said.

Hodja rushed home and got his turkey. He took it to the market, and he asked three times the price of the parrot. People were laughing at him.

"Why are you laughing? You are willing to pay a fortune for a bird the size of my finger, but you don't want to pay a fit price for my large bird."

"But that bird is a parrot. It can talk.
What does your bird do?" they asked.

"It meditates." (Reworded slightly from
Kayayarli 63)

Here students may see that Hodja has interpreted the word "do" in a different way than the owners of the parrot, possibly because of his background in religious studies. His belief that his turkey is doing something more valuable than what the parrot does is based on his holy-man bias that meditating is better than talking. The issue of size is raised here as well, and it appears to be another kind of fallacy, a red herring. After all, why would a big bird that could talk be more valuable than a small bird that could talk?

Using Sufi stories rather than lists of rules to talk about logic could offer an advantage to the social-epistemic rhetorician in that the stories raise questions about why a person would commit a fallacy. In other words, fallacies may be presented as social processes operating in relationship to other processes such as consistent deductive reasoning or desires to persuade or to save face, rather than as a sin against some absolute system of logic. A relativistic approach to the teaching of fallacy is

consistent with the idea that our style of arguing is culturally constructed.

Positivist Views

Our assumption that we can view the world objectively has been supported by a modernist tradition in which we developed a great trust in scientific method. We have thought that we could achieve objectivity by narrowing our view and limiting the variables. But the common-sense realist idea that we can believe what we see characterized human thought long before the modern period. Back in the twelfth century, the Sufi teacher Ghazzali introduced a teaching story to draw students' attention to the disputes that arise when people believe their own sense-knowledge.

It is as if some blind men, hearing that an elephant had come to their town, should go and examine it. The only knowledge of it which they can obtain comes through the sense of touch; so one handles the animal's leg, another his tusk, another his ear, and, according to their several perceptions, pronounce it to be a column, a thick pole, or a quilt, each taking a part for the whole. (Al-Ghazzali 20)

This story is anti-positivist in that it depicts all observers of a phenomenon as positioned and the language they use in describing it as unrelated to the thing itself. I have used a version of it in my composition and critical thinking classrooms to begin a conversation about how we

know what we believe we know. I can't think of any other technique or a reading commonly used in composition classes that cuts to the bottom line of this issue so quickly.

The Status of the Experiencing Subject

By writing a story in which the observers are blind, Ghazzali raises another question that is of interest to postmodern composition theorists: what is the status of the experiencing subject? Is it possible for a person to see any part of reality?

James Berlin's answer is that the individual's consciousness is determined by cultural forces. "Each individual occupies a position at the intersection of a multitude of discourses, which Freire, in the manner of Barthes, calls codes," he says (*Rhetorics* 98). He sees individuals as irredeemably immersed in history, as wrapped up in all the conditioning that has produced their habits of thought. This idea has been expressed by Shah in similar terms, as he comments that the ordinary person is completely caught up in the alternating personalities of various social roles that he or she plays in different circumstances (*Sufis* 349).

Berlin proposes (*Rhetorics* 124) a composition course unlike those "that insist that each student look within to

discover a unique self," a course that "argues that only through understanding the workings of culture in shaping consciousness can students ever hope to achieve any degree of singularity." Sufi teachers do some of the same kind of work to make students aware that the "self" they ordinarily identify and imagine to be their own and only self is an artificial construct. Shah calls it the "commanding self," and the "conventional self:" a personality shaped by cultural conditioning and characterized by emotional reactions, opinions and preoccupations (*Learning* 42,74). He says that the student must attain knowledge of the self, beginning with that secondary self, and learn how to set it aside at will (*Learning* 30). He maintains that students cannot reach real understanding until they understand that they are "largely a bundle of what are nowadays called conditionings—fixed ideas and prejudices, automatic responses. . . which have occurred through the training of others" (*Sufis* 115). This concept of the secondary self sounds to me very much like the same complex of influences that Berlin refers to when he says that "each individual occupies a position at the intersection of a multitude of discourses" (*Rhetorics* 98).

Lester Faigley sees a current move in composition away from admiring the individuality of the student occurring as a response to postmodern theory advanced by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Jurgen Habermas. Faigley writes:

As a result, many in composition have abandoned the modernist privileging of individual expression and mental processes and have turned to the examination of meanings and practices linked with certain discourses that are historically produced. (22)

However, Faigley observes that this postmodern move has not been accepted by the many writing teachers who want students to compose as though they were stable and coherent or who believe in the writer as an autonomous individual capable of agency, authentic voice and self-realization (15). Essay prompts in classrooms and standardized tests still typically begin, "In a coherent and focused essay, show (or describe or analyze or discuss) . . . giving an example from your own experience." This kind of assignment still constructs a modernist student subject.

Although Faigley sets up this dichotomy as a problem that divides composition teachers into opposing camps, requiring "surrender" on the part of the modernists (15), in practice many of us encourage students to understand the

assumptions carried by their cultural heritage and then to write about their experience in a realistic way. We use both points of view, the modern and the postmodern, at the same time. Possibly we do not agree with Faigley that writing for self-discovery and intellectual self-realization are necessarily identified with a stable and constant self.

Sufi teachers do not limit themselves to any one position in this debate, either. They teach that the human mind develops partly because of the impacts it has been exposed to and partly because of its ability to use those impacts. Sufis, like critical literacy teachers, are working on a project to make the student aware of cultural conditioning. But they believe that by becoming aware, by pushing that conditioning to one side, the student finds an underlying creative individuality (Shah, *Sufis* xi).

For a Sufi, the incoherence of the subject is a discovery to be celebrated, because it allows the individual more than one point of view. Coleman Barks writes of the contribution of this concept to the ecstatic power of Rumi's poetry, "an ecstasy melting the confinement of the ego into a larger, elastic, cross-pollinating dance of the selves" (Rumi, *Open* xi). Rumi writes of the self as

playing multiple roles when he observes, "You're sitting here with us, but you're also out walking in a field at dawn" (*Open* 65). His words could be read as a mundane observation that any teacher might make, that some of the students whose bodies are present are mentally somewhere else, but Rumi comes back again and again to this idea of the person as larger than the body. He and other Sufis often picture the outer self of a human being as something like a suit of clothes. "You're the diver's clothes, lying empty on the beach," he writes (*Open* 65).

The Problematics of Language

Whatever the nature of the individual writer, language itself is a problem to postmodern theorists and to Sufi teachers alike. Berlin tells us that in the light of postmodern philosophies advanced by Saussure and Derrida, critical readers can no longer mistake language for "the transparent conduit of transcendental truths" (*Rhetorics* 68). Language always carries out the ideological projects of the group in power, in his opinion, and our blindness to this fact has been "one of the supreme conquests of the Enlightenment"(xvii). One vitally important project of the critical literacy classroom, as he sees it, is to study and critique signifying practices.

Dispelling the myth that language can represent either everyday reality or transcendent truth is a major project of the Sufi pedagogy as well. Rumi, in particular, often echoes the Platonic idea that words deceive, that they are too abstract and conceptual to represent real objects (Barks in Rumi, *Open xi*).

Rumi's story of the travelers and the grapes is one of the most commonly told Sufi stories about language and its failure in situations where communication is needed:

Four men were given a piece of money.
The first was a Persian. He said: "I will buy with this some *angur*."
The second was an Arab. He said: "No, because I want *inab*."
The third was a Turk. He said: "I do not want *inab*, I want *uzum*."
The fourth was a Greek. He said: "I want *stafil*."
Because they did not know what lay behind the names of things, these four started to fight. They had information but no knowledge. (Shah, *Sufis 103*)

This story illustrates that the words used by the travelers present an appearance that each wants something different. Their words are unconnected to any real object, as Derrida observes about words in general (Berlin, *Rhetorics 61*). The speakers cannot resolve their differences, and they fight. It's a common situation, representing the picture of human differences that Habermas

and Lyotard debate, and that Bruffee and Trimbur address in their work on collaboration. What can happen here? Can any rational consensus be reached, or will one individual overpower the others?

The Sufi solution is a different one, for it turns out that the travelers all want the same thing:

One man of wisdom present could have reconciled them all, saying: "I can fulfill the needs of all of you, with one and the same piece of money. If you honestly give me your trust, your one coin will become as four; and four at odds will become as one united."

Such a man would know that each in his own language wanted the same thing, grapes. (Shah, *Sufis* 103)

I have a difficult time swallowing this *Deus ex Machina* resolution to the story. Where is this man of wisdom to be found when we need him? How would we recognize him and why would we trust him with our money? And why does he present such a positivist view of language? A few words that initially caused contention are revealed to be interchangeable units between one language and another. The representation that heteroglossia can so easily be resolved is disturbing to me, because I believe that each language allows its speakers to think and to desire in a different way. I doubt that the travelers all meant the same thing,

even if all were thinking of grapes. Probably one wanted Concords and one wanted Thompson's seedless or some other local variety.

My objections are based on a secular reading of the story, however. That one thing that everyone wants, grapes, is symbolic in Sufi literature for the drunken state of the individual in union with God. Rumi has raised a question of relativity but solved it with a mystical, Platonic unity. Although I can imagine using this story in a composition classroom to raise questions about how people communicate, I am fairly sure the conversation would remain open-ended.

In its complete form, this story does not represent any of the positions that a postmodern philosopher would argue. It allows for none of the rational discussion that Lyotard values, and it does not represent a postmodern critique of language that Habermas or Derrida could accept, because it allows for a unifying foundational truth beyond language (Berlin 61).

Foundational Truth

Berlin, in his discussion of requirements for his critical literacy course, draws upon Derrida's argument that there can be no "unitary concept" (61). Berlin reports that Derrida rejects any attempts to locate "the foundation

for some essential truths that are the same everywhere and always" (61). Thus Derrida rejects the idea that people could all want the same thing. As we have seen in the story of the grapes, Sufis have come to different conclusions. A Sufi might say that foundational truth exists, but it is not accessible by language, and it is not where we have been looking for it.

This idea of looking for truth in all the wrong places is a common theme in the teaching stories (as we have seen in Chapter Three with the story of Mulla Nasrudin looking for his key). But from a Sufi point of view, to say that there is no absolute truth is a self-contradictory statement, a trap set by language, for the statement itself masquerades as an absolute truth. It is like saying that all generalizations are false. Nevertheless, in a Sufi system as well as in a postmodern one, individual claims to knowledge of absolute truth are suspect. As it happens, there's a Sufi teaching story about this very dilemma:

Whose Truth?

"Laws as such do not make people better," said Nasrudin to the King; "they must practice certain things, in order to become attuned to inner truth. This form of truth resembles apparent truth only slightly."

But the King decided that he could, and would, make people observe the truth. He could make them practice truthfulness.

His city was entered by a bridge. On this he built a gallows. The following day, when the gates were opened at dawn, the Captain of the Guard was stationed with a squad of troops to examine all who entered.

An announcement was made: "Everyone will be questioned. If he tells the truth he will be allowed to enter. If he lies, he will be hanged."

Nasrudin stepped forward.

"Where are you going?"

"I am on my way," said Nasrudin slowly, "to be hanged."

"We don't believe you!"

"Very well, if I have told a lie, hang me!"

"But if we hang you for lying, we will have made what you said come true!"

"That's right: now you know what truth is - YOUR truth!" (Shah, *Exploits* 7)

Nasrudin is pointing out in this story that transcendental Truth bears little, if any, resemblance to the kinds of temporal truth that are legislated, promoted or enforced by societies and governments. The King, however, does not recognize the difference. He believes that he can use his embargo to coerce his subjects to align themselves with truth. The story could be seen as a case of equivocation, where the word "truth" is being used in different ways by the two characters, or as an exhibit of amphibole, where by shifting into the future tense Nasrudin unmask the looseness of the rule the King has made.

For those of us who have weighed the critiques of postmodern philosophy, it appears that Nasrudin recognizes

the existence of local standards when he informs the king that his truth is personal. This is a move that postmodern philosophers would approve, because they situate every kind of evaluation in a historical perspective. Teachers of composition have moved in the direction of recognizing standards as localized by separating the ideas of grammatical error and moral rectitude, and by observing that people speak differently in the different discourse communities that they occupy and visit.

CHAPTER FIVE: The Magic Mirror

In the teaching story that opens this paper, one of the dervishes, Dho-Agha, who had always looked at the world upside-down, went to the land of the Magic Mirror, where he hung by his heels and viewed eternal truths reflected in a mirror constructed from the thoughts of mankind (Shah, *Tales* (103)).

The idea expressed in this story, that Dho-Agha's peculiar actions represent one of humanity's valid ways of knowing, is evidence of the Sufi inclusion of Platonic teachings in their narrative of knowing. Through an indirect, reflective way of looking, realities that are otherwise invisible may be glimpsed, but, as the story warns, not always. Dho-Agha's students, working with only the fossilized outer form of his teaching, with only the method, failed to reach ultimate truth, but saw in their mirrors only their own faces. This description is an extremely limited account of a teaching system that, at its height, was Platonic in a much vaster sense, informed by a belief that all tangible reality participates in an invisible reality, a Form behind all forms.

This Sufi summary of an educational activity is reminiscent of Berlin's description of the Platonic

rhetoric he locates at the center of "Expressionist" textbooks of the 1970s. The course plans were created by teachers who believe, like Plato, in the existence of Truth and urge the student to find it by exploring private experience ("Contemporary" 240). The textbooks suggest the use of a dialectic method to get rid of beliefs and assumptions false to the self, and they encourage students to employ metaphor and analogy to approximate truths that cannot be expressed directly. Their approach can be classified as Platonic, Berlin explains, because in a Platonic scheme Truth cannot be conveyed by language, so the purpose of discourse is not to transmit Truth but to remove error so that Truth can be found. He adds that the rhetoric may be disruptive, asking the student to give up previously-cherished assumptions and beliefs (239).

Berlin's perspective, of course, is that of a New Rhetorician: his purpose is to shake up old ways of thinking, but not to find any underlying Truth. He considers any foundational base to be another layer of error. I'd like to argue that Berlin's description of Platonic threads in composition is similar to Shami's story in that it notes the visible and static forms of a teaching method without capturing the spirit of it. I believe that a

larger version of the Platonic mindset than a belief in "authentic self" has been at work in our culture and in many composition classrooms in recent years, much as it was at the height of the classical Sufi period. In the last half of the twentieth century, Americans have referred to this heightened awareness of process and wholeness as "the paradigm shift."

The Sufi sense of the invisible world of flux and interconnection is not extremely evident in the teaching stories because the stories are used at the elementary level of their education system. The mystical and ecstatic material is introduced later, and it is often expressed in poetry. Sometimes, though, Jelaluddin Rumi attaches a Platonic moral to a story.

When, for example, Rumi tells the story of the disruptive student who goes into the mosque disguised as a woman (see Chapter Three, page 34), he goes on to advise teachers to be "the scent of roses that shows where the inner garden is" (*Delicious* 103). He moves from a story expressed in terms of everyday activities to a statement that there is an invisible inner world to be discovered.

When he retells Ghazzali's story of the elephant (see Chapter Four, page 47), he suggests a solution to the

problem of positionality: the unchanging light of Moses, a metaphor he has used often to represent divine love (Schimmel, *Wind* 187). His version of the story goes like this:

The light of Moses is here and now, inside you.
Pharaoh as well. The ceramic lamp and wick
change,
But the light's the same. If you keep focusing
On the translucent chimney that surrounds the
flame,
You will see only the Many, the colors
And their variations. Focus on a light within
The flame. You are that.
Where you perceive from should not change what
you perceive,
Unless you're in a dark room.
Some Hindus brought an elephant to exhibit.
They kept it in an unlit house. Many people came
and went
Through the darkness. They couldn't see anything,
So they felt with their hands. One person's palm
Touched the trunk. "It's like the downspout on a
roof."
One felt an ear. "More like a fan."
The leg. "I find it round and solid like the
column on a temple."
One touches the back. "An enormous throne."
One says *straight*, another *crooked*.
If each had a candle, differences would
disappear. (*We Are Three* 40)

In this poem, Rumi represents the idea that all knowledge is situated by showing a scene in which the limited sense perceptions of people cause them to disagree. But, he says, there is a light within each of us that can reveal the one unified Truth. That light is Moses: it is love.

It's a Platonic solution to the problem of knowing, a solution that suggests that when people look by the light of love for one another, they all see the same thing.

Sometimes Rumi locates this Reality within, and sometimes he describes it as another place, outside the binary divisions of human influence and power struggles.

Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing,
There is a field.
I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
The world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other,
Doesn't make any sense. (*Open* 82)

Rumi sees a vision of another place beyond the conditioning of culture, a place where people are all united. Then again, maybe it is not a place, but an action.

The wheel that lifts some up
and drags others down,
we're not riding it anymore.

We've jumped off that
good-and-bad. (*Birdsong* 60)

Rumi's poetry is full of movement in which every individual action is a metaphor for a larger movement. It's an idea something like the concept of "holomovement," a word coined by physicist David Bohm to reconcile quantum mechanics and relativity theory. In Bohm's Neoplatonic theoretical construct, matter, energy, and mind are all

manifestations of an invisible order that is the primary reality. Modern-day Sufis often point to Bohm's work as evidence that the Western world is finally catching up to what the classical Sufi teachers knew all along (Breton and Largent 25).

Nonlocality is another concept from new physics that is reminiscent of Platonic and Sufi understandings. This theory says that there is an invisible connection linking particles that are traveling in opposite directions (Breton and Largent 15). The search for connectivity behind apparently discrete phenomena is central to Sufi thought - and, of course, very different from the current tendency in composition to define all observations and values as local.

Sufi work not only expresses a reproduction of the most abstract Platonic ideas; it does so by way of many of the same symbols that Plato used. Rumi, in particular, recreates Plato's works in considerable detail. His teacher, Shams, is a figure that closely resembles Socrates. Shams goes around barefoot, sometimes in disguise, pretending to be ignorant and asking people questions until they are so disturbed by his subversive activities that they put him to death. Rumi's stories about

him, like Plato's stories about Socrates, are almost all dialogue.

Other Sufi teachers, including Mulla Nasrudin, emulate Socrates by flouting the ordinary lecture methods of their time; in fact they criticize oratory and poke fun at some of the most respected figures of the country. They enact a dialectic by a method of systematic doubting, looking for the Truth that they believe their students have forgotten. Sometimes they present amusing or erotic analogies to make a point. Sometimes they are possessed with a 'divine madness' and talk of God as 'the Beloved.'

The many similarities between Plato's stories and those of the Sufi masters are not an accident, for the Sufis read Plato and referred to him as their "First Master." Sufi mystics, familiar with the Socratic method of teaching as Plato presents it in *Phaedrus* and other dialogues, made use of Socratic techniques for bringing students to a knowledge of Truth.

Socrates and the Sufis start right off questioning the student, somewhat as many composition teachers do in first-day talk where they explore the students' literacies, or in classes that begin with narrative writing about personal experience. Sufi and Socratic teaching styles enact a

conscious belief that the student already knows the Truth but must be led to rediscover it. Our contemporary version, as we have seen in Freire's problem-posing with Brazilian peasants, also implies that the student has arrived with some latent knowledge and fluency (see Chapter Six, page 79, for an example).

At the beginning of *Phaedrus*, Socrates and his student are walking in the country, barefoot, (229E) and acting out the first of these strategies. Socrates asks, "Where do you come from, Phaedrus, my friend, and where are you going?" (227), questions that could be taken as merely a polite greeting. But Ghazzali echoes the questions and exposes their profundity in the opening lines of his *Alchemy of Happiness*, where he comments on the saying of the Prophet Mohammed that one must know oneself in order to know God. Ghazzali writes, "Real self-knowledge consists in knowing the following things: What art thou in thyself, and from whence hast thou come? Whither art thou going?" (5-6). Socrates' greeting now might be seen to be connected to his later statement that he is not interested in authority as a source of knowledge, that he must first know himself (229D).

As the Greek dialogue unfolds, Phaedrus confides that he has been listening to Lysias, a famous orator. Socrates wants his student to think critically about what he has heard, but he doesn't attack the problem directly. He realizes that Phaedrus is blinded by Lysias' cleverness and that he wants to be entertained more than he wants to be educated. So Socrates proceeds by pretending to share Phaedrus' enthusiasm for the speech and by continuing to ask questions. These strategies are very similar to one used by Sufi teachers, who often begin by asking their students questions and by praising them (Shah, *Veiled* 25).

Socrates, by calling himself an idiot and by continuing to pretend innocence, both encourages his student to develop his own authority and disorients him by playing a role that is unexpected from a teacher. The purpose – and interactive teachers have been using this ploy ever since – seems to be to get students to think and to take an active part in their own education.

Similar feints are used by Mulla (or Hodja) Nasrudin, the hero of hundreds of Sufi teaching stories. While Nasrudin is never as overt as Socrates in referring to himself as an idiot, his activities are not what students expect from a learned holy man. They parody for the student

the workings of an ignorant mind. The Mulla, although he has studied Islamic law, always disguises himself as an ordinary man or even an idiotic one.

Socrates takes up the theme of disguise as he begins his first speech in *Phaedrus*, in which he takes a position he does not actually support. "I shall cover my head before I begin: then I can rush through my speech at top speed without looking at you and breaking down for shame," he says (237A). Taking on the assumptions of Lysias' speech, that love and lust are the same thing, Socrates creates a parody of his speech and presents that to Phaedrus to see whether the boy will recognize that the argument is wrong.

In this way Plato provides a model for story characters like Nasrudin who are presented as absurdly wrong-headed in, for example, looking for things in impossible places. There is also a tradition in Islam of the philosopher-king traveling in disguise, dressed in rags, begging, often giving extraordinary blessings to those who give him alms.

But parody and disguise don't work to illumine Phaedrus. He continues to express uncritical approval of Socrates' speech. Socrates goes so far now as to point out

to him directly: "That was a terrible theory, Phaedrus, a terrible theory that you introduced and compelled me to expound" (242D).

Socrates, recognizing that his direct statement has not enlightened Phaedrus, then constructs an elaborate analogy to explain the nature of the soul, Love, Truth, and Being. He presents a vivid picture of the soul as a charioteer driven by a bad horse and a good one, of its fall from union with God, of its regrowth of wings when it experiences Love. Some of the same images appear in Sufi work, as when Rumi portrays the love that took the Prophet Mohammed back to Allah as a mysterious flying horse (Schimmel, *Wind* 193).

For the Sufis, the use of direct statement is similarly brief. A great deal of indirect teaching is used first, to force students to exercise their processing powers. Analogy and metaphor are the major teaching tools in a pedagogy where little stories ask the student to make large cognitive leaps. Teachers wait for the students to perform the mental gymnastics necessary to examine their previous assumptions in order to understand the stories, confident that mastering the process of working out the

implicature will enable the student to see through cultural conditioning and assumptions and to think in creative ways. Contemporary teachers, particularly expressivist composition teachers, also use analogy. Peter Elbow's cooking analogy, where the writer is lighting matches under thimbles (*Writing* 67) is a famous example.

Plato and the Sufis face an additional pedagogical problem that we do not share: finding a vehicle for revealing foundational Truth. Since the soul already knows the Truth, it does not need to be told what it is. It needs only to be helped to remember. However, the problem of restoring the memory of the Unity is compounded by the fact that worldly language is inadequate. Socrates and Rumi both speak of the problem of language. Socrates tells Phaedrus that it is impossible to talk about Truth directly. He claims, "Of that place beyond the heavens, none of our earthly poets has yet sung, and none shall sing worthily. . . .It is there that true Being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched." (247 C). Rumi speaks of the inadequacy of words in this way: "The dictionaries have no entry to express my love. If a road can be described, it is not the lover's road" (*Poems*, 1,1). Rumi is saying here, as in many other stories and verses,

that the place beyond this world where love exists is a place beyond words.

This central Platonic idea, that Truth can be learned but that it cannot be taught, underlies the experiential psychology of Sufi teaching and also the idea of a teacherless writing class presented by Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers*.

Finally, we cannot overlook the image of the mirror. In *Phaedrus* (255D), Socrates refers to the teacher as a lover who is a mirror of the divine. Rumi, when he meets his teacher, sees him immediately as a mirror of God. He says to Shams, "Shamsulhaqq [Sun of Divine Truth], if I see in your clear mirror/ Aught but God, I am worse than an infidel!" He recognizes the apostasy in his words and yet continues, "Whether it be infidelity or Islam, listen:/ You are either the light of God or God!" (Schimmel 21). Thus Rumi sees in Shams a divine being, and in true Sufi fashion, prefers his personal ecstatic vision to the letter of Islamic law.

For classical Sufi teachers, a tension existed between their understanding of dynamic process and the religious orthodoxy of medieval Islam. Their radical pedagogy put them at risk for being executed for heresy, as Hallaj was.

It's the same risk, in fact, that Socrates faced when he was accused of failing to honor the state-approved gods of his day. Thinking outside the dominant paradigm was a dangerous activity.

In our day, a different version of the same tension exists. Our experience in religious traditions where God has "chosen people," where God's will has been claimed as an excuse for wars and oppression, makes us suspicious of claims of supernatural knowledge. Our official academic paradigm of acceptable ways of knowing is limited to the empirical and the logical. Invisible connections, spiritual understandings, and intuition are not highly regarded. In this climate, teachers who acknowledge the possibility of a reality we cannot know become the objects of suspicion.

Although we are practical, we have not been willing to abandon all of our ideals; we are not whole-heartedly united in rejecting foundational truth. Faigley's concept of the "ethical subject," Berlin's call for social justice, and Theresa Ebert's "resistance postmodernism" (Berlin, *Rhetorics* 75) are examples of moves that composition teachers are making to limit the range of relativity suggested by postmodern philosophy. Each of these ideas

places some set of values beyond the pale of varying opinions.

I believe we are also making some Platonic moves when we theorize invisible and dynamic organizational structures, systems in which mind is an active participant, behind our pedagogies or the acts of reading and writing. Marilyn Cooper's "Ecology of Writing," for example, envisions composition not as a cognitive process but as an interlocking matrix of dynamic socially-constituted systems. Like Bohm's holomovement, Cooper's model is constantly developing, being made and remade by writers in the act of writing. Writing depends upon a web of systems: systems of ideas, of purposes, of interpersonal interactions, of cultural norms, of textual forms (369-70). Cooper's model does not privilege any particular version of truth, but it suggests a more complex way of looking at the process of writing than a linear model and one more in keeping with the new paradigms of thought that are developing outside our field.

Our habits of mind, our established paradigms, keep pulling us back, however, to reductive thinking, binary oppositions, linear progressions and fragmentations. We want to reduce teaching to a replicable method.

I see a dramatic example of Platonic teaching that has been misinterpreted and reduced to method in the United States in our reading of the work of Paulo Freire. Freire describes his work as a problem-posing education where students "come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (*Oppressed*, 71). He goes on to refer to students as "beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation" (71). He defines the terms under which students may be authentic, but he does not deny the possibility. And he calls for "unity within diversity" (*Heart*, 86-87, 106) as the realization that can lead to victory over discrimination against minorities.

Freire's work in teaching both literacy and social unrest to Brazilian peasants was extremely effective, so much so that he was exiled from Brazil in 1964. He described his method: he looked at the culture in which his students lived and presented to them some words that would interest them so much as to be "generative." The students learned very rapidly to read and write and also to enter into an intellectual distancing that allowed them to diagnose and correct the culture that oppressed them.

Patricia Bizzell describes in *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness* how composition teachers here in the United States adopted Freire's methods, thinking that they would have the same effect on basic writing students (Daniell 401). Although Freire himself warned readers that some would reject his work, with its emphasis on love and hope, as overly idealistic (*Oppressed*, 21), teachers in the Northern hemisphere ignored his idealism and adopted his method as though it were ideologically neutral. When we didn't get the same results, we wondered why. Bizzell's conclusion is that no method can itself create critical consciousness (Daniell 401). Social equality is not an inevitable result of critical thinking. Teachers who value democracy must recognize that promoting that value in students involves asserting influence. The changes that Freire inspired in his students, then, were not solely the result of teaching them critical thinking.

Beth Daniell writes that North Americans have overlooked the charismatic relationship Freire had with his students and the passion he brought to his educational philosophy. Freire treated his students with respect, asked them about their lives, and listened to what they had to say, just like Socrates, and they responded by making great

progress. Daniell writes, "Being treated . . . as if one is - yes - a fellow child of God, allows some people, even the most silenced, to 'come to voice,' to use bell hooks' term, and in so doing, to see the world and themselves differently" (402). Daniell argues for reinstating the missing element of spirituality in composition classrooms.

Critical thinking and Platonic ideals are interwoven in Sufi teaching, and they are not as clearly separable in composition as some of us hope. Both ask students to reject some of their assumptions and cultural conditioning, and both question the adequacy of language. The separation between them becomes even more problematic when we realize that justice and harmony do not arise automatically from critical reading. Teachers who promote any values -- racial or sexual equality, love, beauty, peace -- must face the realization that they have left the camp of postmodern relativism.

CHAPTER SIX: The Fruit Vendor

Learning objectives in composition classes have become more abstract in the postmodern era. In most composition classrooms, the teaching of rhetorical strategies, such as the modes of discourse and the five-paragraph theme, has been supplemented, or even replaced, by the teaching of psychological strategies for managing cognition, strategies such as planning and revision (Bereiter and Scardamalia 249). How do we teach students to perform these processes and even more complex and social ones such as questioning assumptions and reading critically? Here, again, the experience of the Sufi masters is congruent with the latest ideas in composition theory.

Sufi teachers employ a variety of strategies for enticing students to expand their capacity for processing knowledge. They do not work through traditional, frontal methods of instruction such as supplying students with information and telling them the rules for processing it, but by setting up experiences that invite students to learn through their own investigations. Sufi pedagogy is well illustrated by a story told about a fourteenth century teacher in the Middle East, founder of one of the major Sufi orders:

Someone said to Bahaudin Naqshband:
"You relate stories, but you do not tell us
how to understand them."

He said: "How would you like it if the man
from who you bought fruit consumed it before your
very eyes, leaving you only the skin?" (Shah,
Thinkers 137)

Reading between the lines of this very short story, we
see a student whose expectations are based on a traditional
received-knowledge pedagogy and a teacher who sees the
process of making meaning as the juicy part of education.
We see a teacher who poses a problem in the form of an
analogy. The teacher sees that interpreting stories for the
student would not facilitate understanding but would rob
the student of a valuable experience.

Paulo Freire tells a very similar story about his
experience in teaching illiterate peasants in Brazil. A
student said to him, "Why don't you explain the pictures
first? That way it'll take less time and won't give us a
headache" (*Oppressed* 49-50). Freire, too, needed to
convince the student that he was able to think for himself.
Freire uses the incident to introduce the readers of
Pedagogy of the Oppressed to his concept of preliterate
knowledge. His belief that the student already "knows
something" allows for a concept of education that is
generative.

Sufi methods depend on a vision of the activities of experiencing, reading, and interpreting as active, recursive processes. Many of the methods used by Sufi teachers call to mind strategies that are being used in some composition teaching today.

Scatter

Variety itself is a feature of the Sufi pedagogy, referred to in Sufi literature as "scatter" (Shah, *Sufis* 18). Unlike the dervishes in the story of "What Befell the Three," who each remain faithful to a single teaching method, Sufi teachers employ an arsenal of weapons to destroy the commitment of the student to a vision of the world as fragmented. At Sufi gatherings, students participate in multi-part choral singing, drumming, and dance. The stories are often told or enacted or sung to ecstatic melody, interspersed with instrumental music, or as openings to lectures and class discussions, to promote interaction between the teacher and groups of learners. The teacher uses the stories to pose problems or to act as a mirror, mimicking the dysfunctional behaviors of the student (Shah, *Learning* 289). In this sense, the stories are immediate and oral. But the Sufi teacher doesn't expect the student to cross the bridge of implicature instantly or

even by the next class meeting. The stories are expected to work gradually and cumulatively to break down the students' resistance (*Learning*, 38), an expectation that seems to me more consistent with the recursive nature of reading and writing than with the immediacy of oral communication.

This concept of teaching is currently popular in elementary education, where we call it "multiple intelligences." It does not seem to be discussed so overtly in the literature of composition, but many of us teach in ways that are informed by this idea, asking our students to "read" codes from popular culture, movies and songs as well as from the traditional genres of academic writing. We also display the value we place on variety by moving from lecture to small group to one-on-one conferences and written response to student writing.

The Reading Process

Sufi stories, although sometimes orally transmitted, have also been written down and read as instructional texts that are expected to be read differently by different readers or differently by the same reader at different times. Unlike the composition/literature teacher who seeks to support a text with historical context in order to give it a more determinate reading (Berlin, *Rhetorics* 130), a

Sufi teacher's goal is to foil the concept of an educated reading.

Sufis have done unique work in adapting the written word to the purpose of generating multiple responses. Shah compares these written texts to dehydrated onions (*Learning* 67). They are not exactly the same thing as fresh onions (a symbol for live teacher-student interaction), but if the necessary ingredient (water or understanding) is applied, the resulting product will be of some immediate use and will also teach the reader to recognize fresh onions on some other occasion.

The Sufi idea that the understanding process occurs as a sequence of drafts is something like the reading theory advanced by Peter Elbow. Elbow writes:

Students could come to see reading as an obvious process of cognitive and social construction if there were only a tradition in literature as there is in writing of . . . sharing what we might call 'rough drafts of reading': showing or talking about their actual reading process from the beginning. (*English* 131-32)

I suggest that the Sufi way of using teaching stories, sharing differing interpretations, is very much the kind of tradition that Elbow wishes for.

Difficulty

Shah says that the stories "often enable people to absorb ideas which the ordinary patterns of their thinking would prevent them from digesting" (*Sufis* 1). He adds, in *Learning How to Learn*, that students may be turned "away from automatism by using techniques devised to outmanoeuvre it" (127). What are those techniques?

One of the ways that Sufi teachers subvert the habitual thought patterns of their students is by refusing to give answers to the questions the stories raise. This idea that students should do the work of discovering the alternatives for invention or revision is expressed in contemporary theory in non-directive, problem-posing responses to student writing. Taken to an extreme, the idea manifests itself as the "generative power of difficulty" pedagogy developed by Anthony Petrosky.

The Sufi version of difficulty lies in the teacher's refusal to explain obscure texts. My first experience with Sufi teaching is a clear illustration. About 1983, I read one of Idries Shah's books and, intrigued, wrote to his North American headquarters, the Institute for the Study of Human Knowledge, for further instruction. I received a letter saying that, when I had read and understood all of

Shah's books, the teachers might speak with me. Enclosed was an order blank for 21 books. I was angry and suspicious about the motivation of these teachers, but I bought the books, a collection of more than 2000 Sufi teaching stories strung together with some cryptic commentary. I began to study them. Five years later I was still studying them, and it appeared to me that I had still not begun to understand. I was discouraged by the large number of stories that told about teachers turning away students who were incapable of learning. A similar story is told by psychologist Jay Einhorn (5), who concludes that the stories "provide some information useful right away and additional dimensions of potential value which become activated as and when the student is ready." Einhorn postulates that the work the student does to understand the stories helps to build connections between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, a step toward the evolution of a new organ of perception (3).

At the time I was reading Sufi stories, I could not identify any positive effects from the work I was doing. However, when I finally met live Sufi teachers, I found that "soaking" in the stories had prepared me to accept teachings that I would have rejected a few years earlier.

The stories had weakened my grip on the world-view I had previously thought of as reality and had increased my tolerance for "impossible" evidence. My period of isolated study also seemed to have increased my capacity to concentrate my attention. My experience with the Sufi version of difficulty pedagogy was that its benefits were not immediately visible.

Anthony Petrosky (262) offers an example of the use of difficulty pedagogy in composition when he describes student writing about a chapter of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* as they begin a freshman writing course centered around the theme of the relationships among body, power, and knowledge. The dense and unfamiliar text challenges some students to make the mental leaps necessary to understand it, to see Foucault's discussion of the changes in punishment in his terms, rather than in the preconceived terms of a modernist narrative of linear progress (263). The difficult writing assignment may make rhetorical moves, such as openings and conclusions, more visible. Petrosky writes that students' understanding of Foucault is shaped by their rereading and their writing of multiple drafts as they gradually move into the intellectual realm of his complex text (279).

Some students never do understand it, however, presenting a pedagogical problem that Petrosky doesn't seem to solve. Rise Axelrod's commentary on this pedagogy is that some students (CSUSB students for example) may need additional "scaffolding" early in the invention process because they do not have the schema in place to understand or to write about difficult texts. She questions whether sufficient motivation may be a problem for State University freshmen dealing with obscure texts.

Sufi teachers, facing the problem of students who don't understand, write some students off as unteachable, commenting that they are unwilling to abandon their addiction to their existing beliefs, or that they have insufficient time and capacity (Shah, *Learning* 110). Motivation is not a quality highly regarded by Sufis, who see it as a form of sanctified greed that usually prompts a student to excel in ways that cause injustice to others. But the Sufi teacher has other techniques to use in breaking down the resistance of students. One technique, illustrated by the story of the teacher as a fruit vendor, is that of teaching by analogy, by substituting a simple and concrete example for a complex abstract idea.

Goal Concretization

"Goal concretization" is the term used by educational psychologists Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia for procedures that reduce the processing burden necessary for bringing a self-regulatory strategy into use by substituting a simplified version of the project for the difficult and abstract goals that students are ultimately to master. A goal concretization teaching strategy might introduce a metaphor or an analogy, creating a substitute problem that is psychologically equivalent (287). The Sufi story in Chapter Two about the teacher in the well might be used in this way. After the students laughed at the plight of the teacher, they might transfer their understanding of it to the Sufi problem of deciding when it is appropriate to help a neighbor. Or they might transfer their understanding of it to the composition problem of deciding under what circumstances Standard English or grammatical correctness is required.

The strategies required for situating one's argument in an ongoing academic conversation might be another example of the kind of self-regulatory function that Bereiter and Scardamalia address. One story that could be used for the purpose of helping students see their

positions as situated is "The Elephant in the Dark."

Looking at this silly fictional situation, where people are groping around in the dark trying to agree on a definition of elephants, students quickly see that their efforts to find a single true objective definition of their topics are equally vain.

The ideas of goal concretization and difficulty may seem to be contradictory if we think of them in terms of the amount of processing required for the student to solve a problem. But the Sufi view of thinking doesn't approach the strategies from that direction. The experience of mental processing, not the solving of a problem, is the goal. Both of these techniques involve mental exercise, and thus both are considered by Sufis to be helpful parts of "the work that breaks us open and devastates the habitual self" (Barks 72).

The concept that a text can do this kind of work is an inherent part of a social-epistemic view of rhetoric. As we have adopted postmodern views of reading and writing as interrelated meaning-making activities, our view of text has changed from a static, positivist image of an instrument of transmission, an object from which students should receive knowledge, to a dynamic image of text as an

ever-changing energy that does something different with each reader. We have moved away from privileging texts for what they are (poetics) to concerning ourselves with what they do (rhetoric) (Berlin, *Rhetorics* xv). This current concept of text is well represented, I think, by techniques that depend on a vision of language as catalytic.

CHAPTER SEVEN: A Donkey in Victorville

I've looked for places in my teaching of composition where a Sufi teaching story might help. Most of the time, when I tell a Sufi story, I use it as an opening joke, and then I ask the students what they think I am doing. Generally my suggestion that I have a purpose is greeted with some kind of resistance. "It's just a joke," a student will say.

I explain that the story seems like a joke, but it was used for another purpose in the culture where it was written. Everyone looks blank. I ask, "Well, why is it funny? Why did you laugh?"

Then the interpretations of the story start coming. A teacher who takes on the disorderly world of Sufi teaching must be prepared for discussion that can go in many directions. When a student gives a new interpretation, I say, "Wow! I never thought of that! That's terrific! Hang on a second while I write that down in my notes." In that way, I model the spirit of open-minded inquiry that I want my students to adopt as well. Students begin to see the activity of unraveling a story as a kind of play.

Twice I have devoted a whole class hour to Sufi stories, in Freshman Composition courses at Victor Valley

College. I made this move at a point in the semester when we had been working for several weeks on becoming aware of slanted language, political language, selective reading, and texts that attempt to manipulate. Some of the reading had been difficult. I suggested that we relax and have some fun with some little stories that have been popular in the Middle East for many centuries.

First I told a little about Mulla Nasrudin. I said that a Mulla in Islam is a village holy man, the person you would go see to get married. Nasrudin probably never existed, but he has been a popular folk hero for a long, long time, going around saying wise things or bumbling idiot things that helped people see what was going on. The Turkish government has recently provided him with a biography and a tomb so that tourists can go visit it, and they have put his picture on their postage stamps. He's a plump little cartoon character like Charlie Brown. I really don't know why that government is honoring him, because Mulla has never thought much of government, I said.

Actually, Mulla hasn't thought very highly of English teachers, either, I confided, and I told a version of the story of the teacher in the well (see Chapter Two), where the holy man's name is Nasrudin (Shah, *Exploits* 18).

The class laughed. "I don't know why I'm telling you this story," I said. "What's the point?"

"The point is that practical matters are more important than grammar," one student said, helpfully.

"Oh. Yes," I said. "But that's not MY point, because I'm your English teacher." The students laughed some more, and I passed out handouts with three more Sufi teaching stories.

The first one was "The Elephant in the Dark," which appears in Chapters Four and Five. I used the poetic Rumi version, but I left out the part about the Light of Moses, because I was trying to keep this discussion on a secular level.

I asked a student to read it aloud. Then I asked what was going on here. Slowly, hesitantly, students said that the elephant was in a dark room and nobody knew what an elephant was, so the various observers reported different things. I made encouraging noises as this recapping was going on. "What's the solution?" I asked. "Could these different people ever agree?"

From this point, the discussion moved in different directions in one class than it did in the other, but both groups eventually covered the same points.

In the 9:30 class, somebody said, "Well, they could talk it over. If they all compiled their various observations, they would know a lot more about elephants."

"Great idea!" I said.

"But would they agree?" somebody asked.

"They don't have to agree. They just put all their different parts together," somebody said.

"Oh. Like a collaboration," I said hesitantly, as if I were just beginning to get the point.

"Yes," several students said.

"What if somebody turned on the light?" somebody said.

"Aha!" I said. "Would everybody then be able to see the same thing?"

"No," the students said. "Some would see the back of the elephant, and some would see the front. Everybody still has a point of view."

"So what can they do?" I asked.

"They still need to talk it over."

"Is it possible to have a truly objective point of view? Can you ever see the whole elephant?" I asked. Nobody seemed to think it is.

In my 11:00 class, the first answer was that somebody should turn on the light. But from there the conversation

ran the same course, with the conclusion being that observation is inevitably situated. One student suggested that by walking around the elephant one could get multiple perspectives. But other students pointed out that the perspectives of those who traveled would still depend on whether they saw the elephant as meat, or as an art object, or as a relative. It seemed to me that we had found a very easy way to talk about how knowledge is positioned.

Then I asked a student to read the second story aloud, "Don't Lie to Your Mother." It's a story I heard while traveling in central Anatolia. This is the story:

Mulla Nasrudin knotted a rope and put it around his donkey's neck, and he led the donkey through the woods to the marketplace where he planned to sell it. He fed it carrots along the way so it would be nice and fat when it got to the market.

Two boys were following Mulla through the woods, plotting to steal his donkey. They sneaked up behind him and slipped the rope off of the donkey's neck. One of them ran away with the donkey while the other one put the rope around his own neck so Mulla wouldn't notice anything.

Mulla turned around to give his donkey another carrot and saw that he was leading a boy instead.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

The boy replied, "I lied to my mother last year, so she cast a spell on me and turned me into a donkey. She said I would remain a donkey until someone did a kind deed for me. And you, kind master, have fed me carrots and released me from my enchantment. Thank you, thank you, kind master."

Mulla said, "Oh, it was nothing, really. You run along home now, and don't lie to your mother any more."

"Thank you, thank you, kind master," the boy said as he ran to meet his friend.

Mulla continued on toward the market. When he got there, he was surprised to see his donkey being offered for sale by two boys. He walked up to them, looked the donkey sternly in the eye, and said, "I told you not to lie to your mother."

Everyone laughed. I asked them why they were laughing.

What is funny about this story? In both classes, someone responded that it was funny because the reader knows more than Mulla does. This is the response I expected.

Then, in both classes, something happened that I wasn't expecting: the alternate reading came up right away. Some students felt that Mulla knew just as much as the reader and was just pretending to be scammed. "It's a parody of innocence," one student said. Another student said "Huh?" The first student explained the tradition of wise jesters in literature. We built a complicated chart on the blackboard: what Mulla was admitting he knew, what the writer knows, what the reader knows, and what makes us think we know what they know. The column of ideas about what the reader knows grew to include these items: the boys are plotting; one admits he is a liar; he uses flattery; he has an economic interest.

"It's just like politicians, isn't it?" one student said.

"What do you think? Is it?" I asked. Nobody had much good to say about politicians, or much of an answer about how we can expose them, either.

I asked, "Why is it that Mulla recognized the donkey, rather than the boy?"

Students replied, "Tunnel vision," and "Denial." We talked about the effect of one's belief system on what one is able to see. We talked about the difficulty of knowing what to believe. Students who usually were silent seemed to feel comfortable talking about how they know things.

We went on to the third story: "Whose Truth?" which appears in Chapter Four of this paper, the story about the king who was going to hang anybody who didn't tell the truth.

Once again, everyone laughed. "Why is it funny?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm still trying to figure it out," somebody said. Several students were drawing diagrams.

"Is there something wrong with this logic?" I asked. "Has anybody taken a critical thinking class or a philosophy class? Can you help us out?"

Somebody observed that logic doesn't apply to everything. "Maybe truth is something positioned too," she said.

"Can there be an absolute truth?" another student asked. I was getting really excited; never in my wildest dreams has a student asked this question in my class.

"I don't know. Can there?" I asked, and I wrote the question on the blackboard. The students tossed it around for awhile, and I wrote another one: "How would I know?"

"Now you begin to see where we're going," I said, "because you are about to begin working on research papers. You'll be dealing with questions about how you know what you claim, whether it is true, what evidence you have. How would you know whether something was true?"

In this discussion, every student in both classes got involved, including students who have never opened their mouths before. We listed and discussed the ways the students thought of that a person could know something: authority, noting plural voices, evidence such as documents, experiment, repetition, reasoning, behavioral cues, testing a hypothesis, intuition, and faith. There was a lot of talk about "just knowing," the way that mothers know what their children have been doing. Some students

said they never operate on faith. I said that I do; every time I flush the toilet, I do it in faith that the water will go down the drain. This comment prompted somebody to observe that in the Southern hemisphere water goes down the drain the wrong way.

"The WRONG way?" I asked.

Everyone leaped to inform me that water drains counter-clockwise south of the equator. "What's wrong with that?" I asked. "Who says that clockwise is better?" I drew a picture of a globe on the board and asked whether it was right side up. We agreed that it is people in the northern hemisphere who have put themselves at the top of the map and decided which way water should drain.

Thus we came to the possibility that there might be not only multiple voices, but voices that have more or less political power. Someone asked how to deal with multiple voices in a research paper. Some students said that you should look at the different points of view and try to reconcile them, try to find the truth. "Whose truth?" I asked. "What if you are writing about euthanasia or abortion? Is there ever going to be just one answer?"

"What do I do, then?" a student asked.

I suggested that it is possible in a research paper to record the conversation and place oneself within it, without choosing one as right and one as wrong.

I envisioned this discussion as a part of a long-term project in thinking, an event that might be recalled from time to time as we worked on a variety of writing projects. It has seemed to work that way. The elephant, in particular, became a presence in our classroom; when students didn't agree, they sometimes said something like, "Oh, you're looking at this from another side of the elephant."

I think that I used these texts in much the same way that teachers use political texts and ask students to analyze what they mean, but with the important difference that these teaching stories come from far distant culture, so there was no contact zone involved. None of my students had a vested interest in any particular reading of these texts. Their historical context was of interest only in that it was "other."

I did not expect an immediate assessable outcome, but I did want to add a writing assignment to this lesson. One possibility might have been to use the stories as models of analogy and to ask the students to create analogies of

their own. But it was not the form of the stories that interested me; it was the thought processes they inspired. So, the last ten minutes of class, I asked the students to freewrite on the subject of what they know. "Name something you know for sure, and tell how you know it," I said. In creating this prompt, I was enacting another Sufi move, that of asking students to do something would not be possible if they had truly learned the lesson (Ghazzali 70). I read their writing looking for evidence that the idea of knowing had been problematized.

About one fourth of the students showed no such concept. They wrote in common-sense positivist ways about knowing things because they had seen them or because they had learned about them in school. Several of these students defended cultural conditioning, as something they feel obligated to pass on to their children. I thought this move was particularly interesting because we had not directly mentioned conditioning in class, but it appeared that some students felt that it was under attack. About a third of the students expressed some kind of doubt, saying they know some things, but sometimes they are wrong. The remaining students, the largest category, wrote about knowing things

in more than one way, sometimes knowing by authority and sometimes knowing by intuition.

When I looked again at these papers to see what knowable things my students named, a single subject stretched across all the ways of knowing: more than half the students wrote about knowing God. They knew God because they had read scriptures, but they also witnessed in their hearts, or they knew about God because they had been conditioned or brainwashed, but they had also come to their own understanding of God. They knew God because they had seen beauty, or because they had felt His love in meditation.

I was disturbed by this outpouring of religious fervor because I had made such a great effort to secularize the teaching stories. I had not told the students the way they were originally used: to show that all human ways of knowing are flawed, but that a great reality transcends human knowledge. But, I thought, the stories worked the same way in Victorville as they did in medieval Persia, prompting students to question science and logic and authority and to leap to a religious conclusion.

I told this story to a colleague who was teaching Freshman Composition at San Bernardino Valley College. She

discussed ways of knowing with her students without using any Sufi stories, and she assigned the same writing prompt. Her students responded in almost exactly the same way. They discussed a variety of ways of knowing, but more than half of them wrote about knowing God.

Obviously this little comparative study is not conclusive, but it did relieve me of my fear that I had forced my students to turn to religion. It suggests, rather, that some kind of spirituality is important to many students, and that when we open the possibility of working outside the logical-argument box of normal academic discourse we are likely to read about God.

But to return to the question of assessing whether Sufi stories work to augment the ways teachers and students talk about constructing knowledge, I really do not know how to tell. When we use a variety of teaching methods, it is always difficult to sort out which ones had an impact on the students. Further research in this area might use questionnaires or surveys to ask students whether the Sufi stories contributed to their understanding.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Living Outdoors with our Friends

Jelaluddin Rumi wrote this cautionary couplet in the thirteenth century:

When you come across a storyteller
Know a house is being destroyed. (Harvey 55)

The house Rumi is referring to here is the false self, the comfortable self that identifies with body and biography, the self that has bought into the conventions of society. Composition theorists Lester Faigley and James Berlin have addressed the current debate in composition about asking students to occupy this house, identifying the image of coherent and stable writer with the house of illusions built by Enlightenment humanism. Expressivist teachers have also asked students to tear down and remove organizing structures in order to make room for creativity.

This destruction is the only part of the Sufi work I was prepared to consider when I began this study. I was thinking of Rumi's many images of breaking the forms that confine our thought. I was thinking of the Rumi who wrote, "The whole place goes up, all stability gone to smoke" (*Open* 36). These demolition stories seemed to me to do important work for our time by freeing students from pretending to be objective and by calling attention to

hegemonic practices that have limited their success. I was impressed by the way Sufi teachers are able to expose the multiple selves we see with.

But when I put on my curriculum-planning hat, I was constrained by a tradition that separates school from religion. I was constrained by my fear that Habermas might be right in his claim that every foundational metanarrative does damage to someone. I struggled a long time with the incompatibility of my positions.

In this situation, I also looked closely at my students, and I noticed that they rely on a variety of modes of knowing. Intuition and revelation are part of many of their personal epistemologies, standing beside belief in authorities, personal sensory experience, and use of inductive or deductive reasoning. I found that class discussions and writing assignments that ask students to identify how they know what they know often reveal extrasensory or metaphysical experiences. Consequently I do not feel comfortable about excluding these experiences from consideration in my writing classes. I have decided that any exercise that invites students to interrogate their assumptions is a useful one.

James Moffett explores a similar question in his 1982 *College English* article "Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation," considering whether meditation practices that have a transcendent aim are out of place in the composition classroom (246). I am comforted by the conclusion he reaches in his rebuttal to critical comments: "Human beings rely on several authorities for their knowledge. The only problem comes from excluding some. If it is a mode of knowing, it belongs" ("Comment" 404). This line of argument is one that Paulo Freire follows when he comments that he is concerned about classrooms that do not allow students to exercise epistemological curiosity and to engage in dialog about the possibility of ontological responsibility. (Heart 100).

I have another reason for liking to use stories that rely on an assumption that we are, at some deep level, all alike. I think that the postmodern foregrounding of the differences between us does us a disservice to our common humanity. I honor and support the different world-views, ideological commitments and faiths my students bring to the classroom, but I also ask students to keep an eye open for the possibility of cross-cultural absolutes. Is there something we all need, no matter what our background?

Respect, love, opportunity? Are there things that we all do? Make metaphors and create new patterns of language?

I believe that the Sufi stories illuminate a path through the illusions of positivism, fostering a kind of literacy. But that path does not stop at literacy: it leads all the way to a new understanding of our common ground as human beings.

So, as I have worked with the stories and worked with students, I've started taking some risks. I've taught Rumi's elephant story. I've said to my class, "What Rumi means by the Light of Moses is love, a term probably too strong for most of us to apply to the making of knowledge . . . but what if we called it respect?" Heads nodded. Respect makes sense to students.

What if we agree to respect all the voices that emerge in our classroom? What if we imagine the feelings that caused some ancient person to draw a picture of a hand on the wall of the cave: a need for expression, and awe at the capabilities of the human being. What if we bring that awe to the classroom when we look at each other's writing?

I think that many of us in composition, even those most committed to postmodern views, long to reclaim some such meaning for our discipline. Lester Faigley, for

example, looks for ways to find an ethical position, even if it is only a local one (239). James Berlin, even while denouncing foundationalism, affirms his belief that social justice should be a goal of composition classes (53). Ann Berthoff asks that we not attempt to banish foundations, but to develop a critical consciousness with which to examine them, using spirit as a "speculative instrument." (238). Paulo Freire writes about the religious convictions that fuel his fight for social justice, saying "I have always prayed, asking that God give me increased disposition to fight against the abuses of the powerful against the oppressed" (*Heart* 65). These are not far-out airy-fairy voices; these are the voices of people who have relentlessly asked the hard questions that have expanded the landscape of composition.

Sufi storytellers are talking about God all the time, when they appear to be talking about donkeys or keys or the fragrance of the garden. We rarely hear a Sufi speak of God in anthropomorphic terms. But once, long ago, I heard a Sufi say that God created the world because He loves a good story (*Qalbi*). I teach writing for the same reason.

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